

**Special feature: The Politics of Research. Three papers commenting on *Practitioner-based Research: Power, Discourse and Transformation*, by John Lees and Dawn Freshwater (London: Karnac, 2008)**

## ‘Psy’ Research beyond Late Modernity: Towards Praxis-congruent Research

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**ABSTRACT** *Lees and Freshwater’s Practitioner-based Research is a significant intervention into the struggle for the ‘research soul’ of the psychological therapies. Positivistic notions beloved of the managerialist ‘audit culture’, centred on the totem of ‘evidence-based practice’, are increasingly colonizing psy research, creating a new ‘regime of truth’ that privileges ‘standards’, ‘competencies’ and ‘quality assurance’, and presages a shift in the locus of power away from practitioners’ professional autonomy and towards managerialist bureaucracy. In arguing that no one (‘scientific’) paradigm should necessarily be assumed to be more ‘valid’ than a multiplicity of possible others, they advocate the practitioner’s voice having at least equal validity to that of academics and bureaucrats, aiming to establish an ‘epistemology of practice’ that redresses a balance that has become too skewed towards uncritical, and in many ways anti-human, ‘technical rationality’. This review article explores the rationale for this shift, and finds it compelling and convincing. It is also argued here that great benefit can be gained for the future flourishing of psy research from building bridges to other radical-critical research traditions and innovations in late-modern culture. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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### CULTURAL BACKDROP TO THE BOOK

Totems of late modernity like ‘outcome research’, ‘clinical audit’, randomized controlled trials and ‘evidence-based practice’ are dominating much recent research in the psychological (or ‘psy’) therapies, certainly within health-service contexts. Although by no means

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uncontested, this new hegemonic language is arguably creating a new 'regime of "scientific" truth', preoccupied with notions of 'standards', 'competencies', 'quality assurance', 'audit' and 'cost-effectiveness'. Increasingly, practitioners *simply have to use* this language (or at least go through the game-playing motions) if they are to be taken seriously in the 'super-audited' British health service. For many, these are quite alien, 'managerialist' concepts that simply do not belong in anything approximating values-congruent psy practice. These developments also represent a critical shift in the locus of power away from the professional autonomy of practitioners themselves and towards managerial and administrative bureaucracy.

In their new book, John Lees and Dawn Freshwater forcefully argue that practitioners should just as legitimately be viewed as researchers as are (for example) academics and service managers. Following an essentially and refreshing quasi-Feyerabendian line (Feyerabend, 1975), that no one ('scientific') paradigm should necessarily be assumed to be dominant or more valid than a multiplicity of others within late-modern (psy) culture, they advocate a more balanced approach to research, where practitioners' voices are accepted as having at least equal validity to that of academics and bureaucrats. In aiming to establish what they term an 'epistemology of practice', they hope to redress a balance that has recently tipped dramatically towards the 'technical rationality' that drives the still-dominant positivistic paradigm.

With its long-overdue call for researchers and practitioners to reflect passionately on their profession and the knowledge systems that underpin it, the book is therefore a very welcome challenge to the ways in which the limiting epistemological and ontological axioms of the dominant audit-driven paradigm influence, or even construct, how practitioners conceive of their work within prevailing late-modern 'regimes of truth'. It has, above all, a *transformational* aim, as the co-editors believe that working with our experiences in order to transform them is an essential *ethical* imperative in both training and professional development. It also foregrounds *ways of thinking* about research, and not merely its procedural minutiae, presaging, as the editors hope, what will become an increasingly prominent approach to understanding and interrogating professional life.

## THE BOOK ITSELF

In their editorial introduction, the editors highlight their concerns about the way in which the academy is 'increasingly influencing the way we think as clinicians', with an ever greater reliance on abstract methodology being in danger of displacing a concern with real, lived human experience (p. xi), and 'a research culture that adopts the thinking of the academic lifeworld rather than the thinking of the clinic' (p. 5). In his Chapter 1, Lees sees *personal experience* in the research process as a necessary complement to more conventional 'objectivist' research methods, rather than something that should be 'bracketed out' to avoid methodological bias (p. 1). Yet 'limited ways of thinking in the academy' (p. 9) have been crowding out *personal experience* in the research process, with practitioners' valuable experience becoming less and less recognized (p. 2), and with pluralism and diversity in the research field being inevitably reduced.

'Autoethnographic research' is then introduced, a highly personal heuristic approach that informs a number of the book's contributions. Here, 'the liminal and the contextual' are

privileged, prioritizing 'their experience over and above methodological structures' (p. 8); and the principle of researcher transparency obtains, with preconceptions, beliefs and experience made transparent (p. 13). In his own clinical training, Lees learnt that direct phenomenological experience, and reflection upon it, was the most useful way of undertaking research, leading him to privilege case histories and vignettes. When facilitating a practitioner training programme, however, Lees found that the focusing upon a 'research question', rather than on direct experience, commonly led to students suppressing their emotions, 'to remove themselves from the research process rather than put[ing] themselves at the centre of it, and to distance themselves from their experience rather than examine it' (p. 4). Emphasis also shifted towards 'logic and rationality rather than their direct capacity for knowing and emotion' (p. 4).

Lees goes on to advocate 'healthcare communities in which the practitioners [are] able to move seamlessly between both lifeworlds and see the... purpose of both of them' (p. 5), and choosing not to 'polarize and criticize other approaches' (p. 7); indeed, he finds the polarization between practitioner and academic research distinctly unhelpful (p. 8). In the research process itself, he tries 'to avoid designing the methodological process in detail at the beginning', not elaborating upon any methodological ideas at the outset, but allowing them to become an emergent property of the developing research process (p. 7).

Lees then links the argument into the cosmology of Rudolf Steiner, who had a great deal to say about different *kinds of thinking*, which is very relevant when reflecting on different kinds and epistemologies of research. Drawing, too, on Erich Fromm, Lees argues that an imbalance towards the academic, and its associated limited thinking, entails the danger of 'evolving' towards a kind of 'automaton consciousness' (p. 9). Enlightenment thinking, he argues, moved too far towards the rational and away from the medieval mind, concluding quite erroneously that 'the direct experience of human beings is too unreliable to have any value' (p. 9); a self-fulfilling situation, moreover, whereby it has now become increasingly difficult today to trust our own experience (ibid.; cf. Reed, 1996).

But it gets worse; for

due to our reliance on protocols, procedures, criteria, and mechanical ways of thinking, our lived experience will increasingly become an irrelevance and we will eventually become reliant on 'evidence-based experience'... los[ing] touch with our natural faculties and capacity for tacit knowing ... (p. 10)

In Chapter 5, Boyd also draws our attention to Jung's typology of directed and logical thinking, and fantasy thinking, which is close to the imaginative thinking in children's free play, a non-directed thinking where 'in verbal form [it] ceases, image piles on image, feeling on feeling' (Jung, 1956, quoted on p. 82).

For Lees, then, it could well be that our future consciousness itself, and our associated quality of thinking, may well be negatively affected by the over-emphasis on the academic and the overly intellectual in research. Lees himself even admits to experiencing his own 'self-alienation and habitual programming tendencies' (p. 10) (he calls this 'thinking about his own narrative' – p. 11). Hence, the rationale for this book – that is, to balance this unfortunate trend with practitioner research.

The importance of reflecting upon one's own narrative cannot be overemphasized, for

it enables me to become more conscious of the extent to which I am influenced by dominant discourses; the way in which the social systems and ways of thinking that permeate my environment create a sense of alienation and a tendency to become robotic and indulge in abstraction. (p. 11)

There is a need, then, to become aware of how psycho-cultural assumptions constrain the way we see; and this can lead quite naturally to 'politically informed action or "praxis"' (p. 12, quoting Freshwater and Rolfe, 2004). The recurrent theme is, therefore, one of 'explor[ing] the process of emancipation from restraints and the limitations of various aspects of society... , including our professional socialization' (p. 13; cf. House, 2003). Gramsci's challenge to the power of the conventional intelligentsia is also invoked (p. 14); and finding a way of writing that is clear and accessible is emphasized, for (Lees again), 'academic writing does not have to be obscure and inaccessible' (p. 15). Developments in narrative, heuristic and autoethnographic research are seen as giving a coherent alternative, and as contributing to a pluralistic healthcare research community (p. 16).

One can immediately see the key concerns and themes in the title of the book's final chapter by co-editor Dawn Freshwater, 'Multiple voices, multiple truths: creating reality through dialogue' – the importance of diversity, a non-objectivist notion of truth, a social constructionist view of how we *actively create* realities... – and in which Freshwater weaves into the discussion dialogue, 'reflexive pragmatism' and discourse, heralding an evolution towards what one might term 'praxis-congruent therapy research'. On this view, 'Accessing knowledge...demands dialogue at many different levels, interacting with multiple discourses, truths, and voices' (p. 215); and we begin to sense here a kind of research and knowledge generation far beyond the kind of comparatively narrow positivism that has come to dominate much psy research.

Freshwater embraces a coherent post-foundational approach to research, which is far more faithful to the subject-matter of the psy field, wishing to provoke us 'into reflecting more consciously and deeply on the process of reading' in an epistemology of reflective practice, with metaphor and allegory 'open[ing] up previously striated spaces', in so doing, stimulat[ing] dialogue (p. 210). We are also encouraged to reflect on what the text has done *to ourselves* as readers, and to make our own connections (p. 211), reflecting on 'how these contrasting and competing discourses [in the book] collide and collude with your own personal discourse' (p. 213).

'Reflexive pragmatism' takes a key place in Freshwater's discussion, with Pragmatism located within the philosophical movement that, historically, includes Peirce, William James and Dewey and, more recently, Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty. Freshwater distinguishes between 'doing' and 'being' pragmatism, and between reformist and revolutionary pragmatism, with the latter claiming the collapse of foundationalism and correspondence theories of truth, and even the end of epistemology altogether (p. 214). While she does not associate herself with the latter, Freshwater does see pragmatism as in some sense revolutionary in its own right, having the potential for 'emancipation, revelation, and transformation' in which all kinds of knowing can potentially be integrated (p. 215). She sees reflexivity as an approach to research in its own right (p. 216) and, for her, reflexive pragmatism questions assumptions; focuses on the social rather than the individual; and addresses power relations and democracy (pp. 216–17)

Mikhail Bakhtin's closely associated notion of *dialogue* is then woven into the discussion, with dialogue (in the thinking of new-paradigm physicist David Bohm, 1996; Bohm et al., 1998) entailing the suspension of one's own opinions and the open consideration of other views, to the opening up and challenging of the whole process of thinking itself (cf. Lees, Chapter 1; see also Bohm et al., 1998), and to the experience of multiple truths (p. 219); for the process of thinking 'determines how we interpret and create our lives and ... how we interpret and create the evidence by which we create our lives' (p. 219). There could be fruitful links to be forged here with the work of Hal Roth at Brown University and others, on the welcome rise of contemplative studies in higher education and research (e.g. Roth, 2006).

The dialectical interplay between structure and freedom is also highlighted, creating as it does 'the dynamic tension and creative ambiguity that make the dialogal [*sic?*] process so exciting' (p. 220). For Freshwater, the methodology of discourse analysis

challenges the authority of the expert writer and replaces it with the authority of the reader ... [focusing] on the meaning and structure of acts of communication in context, both hidden and overt ... , [revealing] how institutions and individual subjects are formed, produced, given meaning, constructed, and represented through particular configurations of knowledge. (p. 221)

There is also an important *political* dimension to discourse analysis: Michel Foucault, for example, used the notion of discourse to challenge positivist truth claims to knowledge; and discourse analysis itself is 'deeply concerned with power, and the complex ways that power and ideology can permeate society and social practices ... , exposing power imbalances, [with] a political and ethical intention [which] emphasizes social action' (p. 222). Emmanuel Levinas is also introduced into the discussion of qualitative methodology, with his argument that 'the very search for intelligibility that dominates western philosophy implies reducing difference and otherness to the same' (p. 223; cf. House, 2005). Levinas's alternative ethic of responsibility to the radically unknowable other is invoked, with Levinas urging us to 'seek a new relationship between ethics and psychology' (*ibid.*).

For Freshwater, all of these post-positivist ideas must be factored into any articulation of a viable and engaged approach to psy research. And above all, she champions *practitioner-based research* (PBR) which is 'a discourse of openness, of participatory dialogue, multiple voices, and multiple truths' (p. 224), with PBR being 'transient and dynamic ... , moveable, changing, and fluid, and [perceiving] data as a series of moments, fragments knitted together through narrative time and space' (p. 225).

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributors adopt a rich, eclectic and sometimes surprising mixture of reflexive, narrative and critical methods. In Chapter 2, Tris Westwood is very critical of the way in which researchers often feel the need to fit themselves into conventional, constraining ways of thinking (pp. 22, 31). We also read about the key issue of *not knowing*, the defensive methodological practices to which it gives rise, and its crucial place in authentic practitioner-based research (see pp. 26, 33).

In a clear exposition of what engaged practitioner-based research can look like, in Chapter 3 Barbara Hunter and John Lees describe the development of their tutor–student relationship on a Masters course in therapeutic counselling. What is fascinating in this

description is what can happen, and how it can be creatively responded to, when the dominant (academic) discourse collides with a more creative, intuitive, post-positivistic discourse that the student brought to a teaching relationship that got 'stuck', and which the protagonists found of way of unsticking and taking forward. We see how the participants themselves can be transformed when an authentic dialogue can be allowed respectfully to emerge between two very different ways of thinking and being (pp. 53, 54).

In her Chapter 5, Jeni Boyd interestingly shows how Carl Jung's cosmology has a distinctive post-positivistic, postmodern dimension (cf. Hauke, 2000). As early as 1929, Jung was writing that 'I think it is best to abandon the notion that we are today in anything like the position to make statements about the nature of the psyche that are "true" or "correct"' – going on to advocate a phenomenology that advocates 'detailed presentation of everything that is subjectively observed' (quoted on p. 75). This chapter also reinforced for this reviewer the view that the transpersonal and the postmodern can indeed benefit richly from a mutually respectful dialogue, one with the other (see, for example, Keller and Daniell, 2002).

In Chapter 6, Christine Crosbie looks at hope and despair in the therapeutic relationship, an in-depth, sometimes hermeneutic narrative-analytic exploration of her own personal and professional struggle around her experiences and concerns about the possible intrinsic abusiveness of therapy (cf. House, 2003). It comes out very clearly how a client can end up feeling abused by therapists who adopt an interpretative stance founded in a causal-deterministic ontology of the therapeutic process (p. 101), and also how the research experience itself can be fundamentally transformative for the researcher (p. 106).

In Chapter 7, Sabi Redwood looks with a refreshing critically deconstructive eye at ethics and reflexivity in research. 'I wish to trouble...' he writes, 'the production of the reality effect through which [conventional] dominant interpretations [of research ethics] attempt to place themselves beyond challenge and negotiation' (p. 117). What a relief it was to this reviewer at last to find some sound sense about research ethics, challenging the often stultifying institutional shenanigans of research ethics boards and committees. Redwood certainly makes no bones about the radical aim of his research, and his deconstructive approach to ethics in therapy.

The important methodologies of ethnography and autoethnography are introduced by Roddie McKenzie in Chapter 8, whereby researchers reflexively 'write themselves into the research story', with ethnographers undergoing the experience they are striving to understand, and treating their own experience as research data (p. 151). Autoethnographical methodology is usually written in the first person, introspectively paying attention to physical feelings, thoughts and emotions (p. 151). I will say more about this aspect of the book below. *Revelation* and *salvation* are also invoked, the former being concerned with revealing that which is hidden and which ordinary approaches to knowledge cannot reveal (p. 158), and the latter entailing personal transformation that restores wholeness (p.159).

Then in Chapter 9, 'Jana Helena' (a pseudonym), maintaining that 'there is no position outside theory, theory itself is always restrictive' (p. 173), proceeds to offer a breathtakingly intense personal report on her own 'fear of psychological death' (p. 168), which at times arguably verges on the confessional. For this reviewer, the question arose quite strongly as to the degree to which such highly personal material can usefully be regarded as 'research', whose sharing is in some sense intersubjectively useful or illuminating for the other (i.e. the reader) – and indeed, just how and where, in any informed, felt sense one is to draw

the line between legitimate heuristic or autoethnographical research, on the one hand, and a kind of confessional narrative which has more to do with the dramatic unfolding of the writer's own process, on the other. This is an issue that Helena is all too aware of, referring to this kind of research being far from 'self-indulgent or narcissistic, as some critics would have us believe' (p. 180). She certainly speaks openly about the way in which she, and her professional/clinical self, were transformed through the process of the research (e.g. pp. 180–1), and again one has to ask whether it is legitimate for such self-transformation to be the *prime motivation* of what we intersubjectively understand as 'research'.

Perhaps this issue is most clearly addressed, and the difficulties with it exposed, in the chapter by Ashwini Bhalla, 'Searching for a voice'. She states that 'self-knowledge was one of the original aims of this research' (p. 202); and that 'The research started with an overall aim to gain a confident *free* voice' (p. 205, original emphasis). Yet if we define as 'research' any undertaking that has as its aim 'self-knowledge', then is not the danger that the net that the term 'research' casts is so wide that it catches pretty much anything to do with personal development, with the danger then being that the term becomes so catch-all in nature that it loses anything resembling specificity or focus?

The issue of power in/and research is occasionally addressed in the book (e.g. pp. 107–11) but it is perhaps surprising that 'power' isn't an indexing term in the book. Perhaps questions of power and the kind of explicitly radical research advocated by Schostak and Schostak (2008) can be drawn upon together in order to pursue what is an urgent and long-overdue task of challenging at root, rather than uncritically colluding with, what some might even view as the fetishized *ideology* of 'research' itself – from psychoanalytic, existential-phenomenological and poststructural/postmodern viewpoints; and this is a task that psy thinking and praxis are surely very well placed to pioneer.

I believe it is also very important for psy research to start building alliances and bridges with a range of other important critical research traditions – not least, with the emerging sub-discipline of Critical Psychology (e.g. Stainton-Rogers, 2009), feminist research (e.g. Lather, 1991), hermeneutic/phenomenological research (e.g. Langdridge, 2007), transpersonal research and ways of knowing (Hart et al., 2000), and explicitly and unashamedly *radical* research (Schostak and Schostak, 2008).

In short, perhaps we therefore urgently need a kind of critical *anti*-research, that, paradoxically, at least opens up the possibility of undermining its own conditions of existence, and even researching itself into oblivion, and which seeks to forge, instead, new sensibilities and understandings about the world and our healthy place in it that, like Feyerabend (1975), seek to go beyond the conventional late-modernist paradigmatic discourse of 'research'.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I suspect that the editors and contributors of the book under review would broadly agree with Alvesson and Skoldberg (1999), who coin the term 'reflexive interpretation' to describe their not dissimilar approach to research, in which research 'consistently admit[s] ambiguity' (p. 288), 'does not conform to any linear process or monolithic logic' (*ibid.*), and negotiates 'a precarious balance between accepting the existence of some sort of "reality" out there, and accepting the rhetorical and narrative nature of our knowledge of this reality' (p. 289). On this view, then, they adopt 'the view of research as a *provisionally* rational

product, in which the kernel of rationality is a question of reflection rather than procedure' (p. 288, italics added), and in which 'there is an unstable and wavering relation between reality and rhetoric, but also a dynamism of re-construction, generated by this very instability' (p. 289).

To capture the spirit of this important book, a wonderful quotation from Ben Okri to end: 'The fact of possessing imagination means that everything can be redreamed. Each reality can have its alternative possibilities. Human beings are blessed with the necessity of transformation' (quoted on p. 98). And 'While [practitioner-based research] is likely in reality to become another dominant discourse (this cannot be avoided), it could also potentially become a discourse of openness, of participatory dialogue, multiple voices, and multiple truths' (Freshwater, p. 225).

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